DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 258 872 SC 016 561

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TITLE Cross-Cultural Differences as Reflected in Stories Given by American and Chinese Children.
PUB DATE Apr 85
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association (Tucson, AZ, April 24-27, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Anthropology; Comparative Analysis; *Content Analysis; Creative Writing; *Cross Cultural Studies; *Cultural Differences; Cultural Traits; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Research Methodology; Socialization; Social Science Research; Social Values; *Story Telling; Student Attitudes; Student Writing Models
IDENTIFIERS *China; *United States

ABSTRACT

Two samples of 316 stories generated by 80 Chinese and 80 American children were content analyzed. The stories were generated using a method developed by Metraux, which asks children to complete stories. According to the study's hypotheses Chinese children were expected to: (1) show evidence of greater social orientation, as reflected by such aspects as a greater number of story characters, the presence of more social interactions, greater emphasis on teamwork and public shame, and fewer interpersonal confrontations; (2) indicate a greater concern with authority; (3) reflect a greater preoccupation with moral and ethical rectitude; (4) show a stronger belief in chance or luck and in the influence of natural forces on one's daily environment; (5) contain more affective elements and less rationality or cognitive aspects; (6) contain fewer instances of physical aggression; and (7) show less economic orientation. Results clearly supported all the hypotheses. These differences reflect cultural differences between the United States and China, which, in turn, are the result of many aspects of those cultures, from differences in child-rearing to differences in the socio-political climate. Also included are a four-page bibliography and tables showing the thematic differences between the stories generated by Chinese and American children. (IS)

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CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AS REFLECTED IN STORIES GIVEN BY AMERICAN AND CHINESE CHILDREN

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April 1985

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SP 016 561

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association (Tucson, AZ, April 24-27, 1985).

Abstract

Two samples of 316 stories generated by 80 Chinese and 80 American children were content analyzed. The results support the hypotheses that Chinese stories should evidence greater social orientation, greater concern with authority and with moral-ethical rectitude, and a greater saliency of the role of natural forces and chance, and would contain more affective elements, fewer instances of physical aggression, and a lesser economic orientation. The results are taken to reflect cultural differences, which in turn are the result of myriad aspects, from differential child-rearing to differing socio-political climates.

Comparative Analysis of Story Completions by Chinese and American Children

Although cross-cultural developmental research is an active field there are almost no studies that provide comparative data between American and mainland Chinese children. Available studies have assessed Chinese-American children in the Chinatowns of San Francisco or New York (Wilson, 1974), children in Taiwan or Hong Kong (Borke & Sue, 1972; Chiu, 1972; Chu, 1979) or in multi-ethnic settings such as Hawaii (Marsella et al., 1975). These settings are highly Westernized and differ substantially in a number of dimensions from the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The present study was undertaken as a result of the senior author's visit to PRC, and is one of a series of studies in progress designed to explore some basic psychological phenomena reflective of the differences between Chinese and American cultures. Specifically, story completions given by Chinese children were compared, through content analysis, with those given by American children to explore the following hypotheses reflective of presumed cultural differences: Chinese story completions should (1) evidence greater social orientation, as reflected primarily by such aspects as a greater number of story characters introduced, the presence of more social interactions, a greater emphasis on public shame as an arbiter of behavior, fewer interpersonal confrontations, and more instances of teamwork; (2)

indicate the more prominent concern with and role of authority, particularly as reflected in the greater number of authority figures and references to authority; (3) reflect a greater preoccupation with moral and ethical rectitude; (4) show a stronger belief in chance or luck and in the influence of natural forces, such as wind and water, upon one's daily environment; (5) contain more affective elements, such as direct expressions of sorrow and happiness, and less rationality or cognitive aspects; (6) contain fewer instances of physical aggression, as reflected in mentions of physical punishment or the use of physical means to settle differences; (7) show a lesser economic orientation, as indicated by fewer instances of payment for damages, reduction of allowance as punishment, or economic jealousy as a motivational theme. These hypotheses are based on the available literature (Hsu, 1970; Kessen, 1975; Murphy & Murphy, 1968; Scofield & Sun, 1960) which stresses the close family ties, the mutual dependence and conformity of traditional Chinese culture, with its emphasis on group solidarity and acceptance of authority, as well as personal observation.

Method

One of the basic differences between current Chinese and American cultures, is that paper and pencil tests and questionnaires so common in American schools are rather alien to the Chinese, notwithstanding their long historical involvement

with professional examinations (DuBois, 1966). Most of the techniques currently available in the Western developmental literature are inapplicable to the Chinese, for theoretical and/or practical reasons.

Metraux (1955), however, presented a story completion technique which seemed eminently suitable, with some revisions, for the present study. Metraux presented a series of six story plot situations, all variations on the theme of loss and accidental damage. In one plot, for example, two boys are walking to school; one boy grabs the other's cap and throws the cap into a tree where it cannot be readily retrieved. In another plot, a classroom teacher discovers some money missing from his desk. Metraux argued that the pattern of story completions given by a group of children would be reflective of common cultural experiences.

Story analyses to assess cultural components is, of course, not a new undertaking. In relation to China, such analyses have been used profitably by Tseng and Hsu (1972) to study attitudes towards parental authority as reflected in well known Chinese stories narrated by adults to children, and by Hsu and Tseng (1974) to analyze Chinese family relations as reflected in classic Chinese operas. In addition, story telling is a central activity in the homes and schools of China (Kessen, 1975).

In Metraux's (1955) investigation, the story plot situations

were presented to 150 ten- and eleven-year-old children in a West German city. The resulting stories were discussed in a qualitative manner, with common plot solutions listed. No statistical data was presented, nor was a comparative group of American children used.

For the present study only five of the stories were utilized, as one story was deemed inappropriate. Minor revisions were made in the stories so each would be pertinent to both Chinese and American cultures: names of protagonists were changed to be culturally appropriate, as well as some details - for example, "playing football" was change to "playing ball," and "going to the butcher's to buy some sausage" was changed to "going to the store to buy some meat." Briefly, the story plots are: (1) As Peter and Frank walk to school, Frank throws Peter's cap into a tree, and retrieval is difficult. (2) Mother sends Michael to the store to buy meat for supper. On the way home, Michael plays with friends and some meat is eaten by a dog. (3) A teacher finds that some money is missing from his desk. (4) Elizabeth interrupts her homework by trying on mother's new coat, and gets some ink spots on it. Mother walks in. (5) John and Bill are playing ball and break a neighbor's window, but no one sees them do it.

After some limited pilot studies indicated the applicability of the story plot situations to children in both cultures, a formal pilot study was conducted with 53 American and 12 Chinese

children, 11 to 13 year old. The 248 stories generated by these children, as well as Metraux's (1955) discussion, were used to develop a content analysis schema covering 125 elements, such as type of story solution given (e.g., which child retrieved the cap), presence or absence of adults, use of physical punishment, evidence of denial, and expressions of sorrow. Most of the elements required a yes-no judgment (is an adult introduced in the story?), but some required a more sophisticated assessment (does the incident reflect a bigger issue such as longstanding rivalry?). Each protocol was independently rated by three research assistants, who had been trained on stories collected during the informal pilot phase. Computed percentage of agreements indicated satisfactory interrater reliability, with a median of 92%, and a range from 70% to 100%, for all except four elements which were then eliminated.

Of the 121 elements that were retained, 74 were deemed to be relevant to the seven hypotheses of the present study as follows: hypothesis 1, 14 elements; 2, 14 elements; 3, 16 elements; 4, 6 elements; 5, 13 elements; 6, 5 elements; and 7, 6 elements.

Protocols were then obtained from two samples of children comparable in age (11 to 13 years old) and sex (equal numbers of males and females). One sample consisted of 80 Chinese children from Bejing (Peking), while the other sample consisted of 80 children from Los Angeles, California. Particularly for the

Chinese sample, it was not possible to obtain additional information on such variables as intelligence or socioeconomic status, but impressionistic evidence suggests that the two samples were roughly comparable within the limitations imposed by the two cultures, and represented average middle class children living in large urban areas.

Children of this age were selected due to their availability and to their hypothesized entrance into Piaget's last phase of cognitive development, that of formal operations, which enables them to deal adequately with the complexities of such a task as story completions (Piaget, 1962).

All children were native speakers in their respective cultures and were tested individually by native speakers. Children were told that the examiner was compiling children's stories and that the child's assistance was needed to complete some stories. For each story the child was asked to tell what would happen, what each protagonist would think and do, to provide a realistic ending to the story. The child was assured that stories would not be shared with school personnel, and that this was not an assessment of the child's intellectual or school abilities. Emphasis was placed on giving a story that might reasonably happen. Where appropriate, the examiners praised the child and/or requested additional details.

The two samples generated 338 and 363 stories respectively.

In order to equate the two samples and to assure equal sex representation in number of stories, a total of 316 stories from each sample were selected. Chi square analysis, using Yates correction when appropriate, was applied to the scores of each of the 74 elements.

Of the 74 relevant elements scored, 62 (84%) show statistically significant differences between the two samples, all except one in the hypothesized direction. The 12 elements that did not reach statistical significance, are all in the hypothesized direction. Although all of the elements cannot be presented here, Table 1 gives a representative overview of the results.

Insert Table 1 about here

The results clearly support the hypotheses, and show that Chinese story completions show evidence of greater social orientation, greater concern with authority and with moral and ethical rectitude, a greater saliency of natural forces and luck, more affective elements, lesser physical aggression, and a lesser economic orientation.

Discussion

The hypothesized thematic differences are given substantial support by the obtained data, and are clearly in accord with what

the literature suggests.

The story completions given by the Chinese children clearly reflect a greater social orientation, and are consonant with the characterization given by Hsu (1970) that Chinese children are introduced into the adult world earlier and in a more comprehensive manner than American children. As Wilson (1980) and others have pointed out, in Chinese society the group is the ultimate standard for approval or rejection of behavior. This characteristic is clearly reflected in many of the story completions given by the Chinese children. In story 1, for example, other children are introduced into the story in 25% of the Chinese responses, but only in 7% of the American story completions. Similarly, in story 3, none of the American children mention public shame, but 12 (21%) Chinese children do. The Chinese stories often reflect the idea that, since group unity is to be highly sought after, deviant behavior violates group goals and causes shame for all. Such undesirable behavior needs to be altered through peer pressure or, if necessary, severe punishment and ostracism.

The role of authority in Chinese culture has been well documented (Hsu, 1970; Kessen, 1975) and the current results are in agreement with both observational and experimental reports. Sidel (1972) comments that Chinese child rearing methods emphasize expectations of good behavior, cooperation, and obedience, while

Breiner (1980) pointed out the tremendous emphasis on discipline and conformity to peer demands. Chu (1979) found Taiwanese children to be more conforming and socially dependent than American children, and specifically to be more responsive to experimental manipulations of modeling based on high or low status of the role model. As Tseng and Hsu (1972) indicate, authority is not to be defied; even when authority is malevolent, it triumphs in the end. These authors also point out that in Chinese fairy tales the mistreated daughter cannot oppose the bad mother directly, but must be rescued by the father. The greater concern with authority is reflected in the Chinese story completions in which more adult figures are introduced, especially of policemen, storekeepers, and school principals. Often these authority figures are given more than average powers, as when the teacher of story 3 is omniscient as to who took the money (in 21% of the Chinese, but 1% in the American story completions).

The Chinese story completions also reflect a greater concern with moral and ethical rectitude. A major cultural force in Chinese society is that of Tao, a continuous search for the appropriate conduct of one's intrapersonal and interpersonal life (Lin, 1980). Western observers have been uniformly impressed by the inculcation of such precepts in everyday schooling (Kessen, 1975), and the story completions reflect this preoccupation with right conduct. For example, in story 5, 50% of the American

children give stories that involve the two boys running away from the broken window, and often with impunity; only 13% of the Chinese children give such stories, but in every single case the boys are either caught, tell the truth, or are afflicted with serious consequences (in one story, both boys eat poisoned food).

The saliency of the physical environment is also reflected in the Chinese story completions, where a number of times the plot resolution is a function of the wind or of fate. This agrees with the observations of Hsu (1970) that because of differential child-rearing practices, Chinese children are more sensitive and responsive to the natural environment, while American children tend to control or change that environment. An interesting aspect is that more Chinese completions to story 2 (dog eats meat) contain a denial on the part of the mother that the action was intentional (26% vs. 12%). While the flavor of most American stories is one of rationality, with an emphasis upon cause and effect, many of the Chinese stories bring in elements that reflect the forces of nature, or of a quasi-spirit world.

Chinese story completions contain more affective elements, as reflected by direct emotional expressions, and fewer cognitive elements, such as rational exchanges between story protagonists. The significance of this can be interpreted in a number of ways. For example, Borke and Su (1972) found that Taiwanese and American second graders differed in their perception of emotional responses

to stories, with Taiwanese children perceiving more angry reactions and fewer sad reactions. These authors postulate that the results reflect child rearing practices: American parents begin socializing their children earlier and, consequently, these children internalize adult standards earlier. As a result, American children experience guilt when they feel or act out of anger. They also postulate that it is more socially acceptable in the American culture to feel sad rather than angry in response to frustration.

Scofield and Sun (1960) also proposed that personality differences between Chinese and American college students, including greater emotional insecurity, reflected child-rearing practices. Although the specific conclusions of these authors may be debated, what is available in the literature does suggest significant differences in affect between Chinese and Americans.

Paschal and You-Yuh (1973) pointed out that the results of their study comparing Taiwanese and American college students on a variety of measures, as well as the results of other investigators (Shen, 1936; Sun, 1968) support the contention that Chinese are more emotionally "unstable" than their American counterparts. If instability can be reinterpreted to mean variability or expressiveness, then the present results are quite consonant. The nature-nurture aspects of such expressivity need to be explored. It is interesting to compare the Chinese polar terms Yin and

Yang--cultural descriptions of inherently contrasting elements of the universe--with the more rational and technical descriptions offered by Western society. This Yin-Yang dimension, which is applied to such diverse aspects as disease and diet, can be characterized by affective adjectives like cold-hot, passive-active, and soft-hard (Lin, 1980). This affective emphasis is underscored by the observation that in Chinese culture fear of loss of affection or of approval from significant others is highly accentuated.

Stories by Chinese children contain substantially fewer elements of physical aggression; this difference may be related to a number of Chinese cultural features. For example, Wilson (1980) indicates that the most powerful source of Chinese socialization is the mother; not only does she have the largest impact on the child in shaming and punishment situations, but she is primarily involved with the giving of affect, while the father is the rule enforcer. Thus, physical aggressiveness, characteristically labeled a more masculine trait, may be less saliently modeled for the child, if not in the family, certainly in the school setting where the emphasis is on discipline and cooperation (Sidel, 1972).

Note should be made that the one statistically significant element that contradicted our hypothesis is the issue of whether the mother in story 4 threatens Elizabeth with telling father. This occurred in only 1 Chinese story but in 10 (19%) of the

American stories.

Finally, Chinese stories contained far fewer economic elements, which reflects current economic differences between two countries. In a number of American stories, the story plot was resolved by the child protagonist paying for the damage, typically with no recognition of the moral malfeasance involved.

In general, the story completions given by the American children reflect themes highly similar to those obtained by Metraux (1955) with German children, although no statistical comparisons are possible. There is in general an expectation that wrongdoing is to be followed by punishment, though such an expectation seems less prevalent than what Metraux (1955) reported. There is also a relatively high value placed on voluntary confession, often with the result that punishment is avoided. Adults are not pictured as omniscient; indeed they are often irrational and inappropriately punitive.

The obtained thematic differences presumably reflect significant cultural differences, in turn composed of different approaches to child-rearing, socialization, religious-ethical practices, the role of the family, etc. In this context, it is worth noting the two major theoretical approaches to understanding the process of socialization. Cognitive development theorists (e.g., Kohlberg, 1964; 1969) focus on cognitive maturation through a series of culturally invariant stages reflective of a universal

development from egocentrism to autonomy, while social learning theorists (e.g., Bandura and Walters, 1963; Bronfenbrenner, 1962; Whiting & Child, 1953) argue that socialization is more reflective of cultural variance and culturally related variables. The present results, though not designed to test these two differing points of view, would seem more consonant with a social learning approach (Wilson, 1980). China is currently undergoing tremendous cultural and economic changes; it would be of interest to assess whether such changes will be mirrored in story completions years hence.

As with any study, there are a number of limitations present, some easy to identify, others more subtle. Clearly a central issue is the comparability of the two samples. Although equated on age and sex composition, the two samples were basically samples of convenience, and it was not possible to control or even assess such aspects as verbal intelligence and socioeconomic level. Even had such assessment been possible, it is clear that the samples are not representative of two countries that are vast and diverse in population.

Another issue centers on the demand characteristics of the story completion task. Tseng and Hsu (1972) have pointed out that Chinese parents tell their children stories of filial piety and other moral teachings, and that stories are used to educate rather than entertain. Thus, the same technique of story completion may

represent quite different tasks for American versus Chinese children.

A statistical problem, that of a substantially increased alpha error rate, arises due to the large number of group comparisons made (Glass & Hopkins, 1984). Because of the exploratory nature of this study, such a simplistic analysis was chosen over a more sophisticated approach. The large number of obtained significant differences supportive of the postulated hypothesis partially vindicates the use of such an approach. It is to be hoped that further studies will delineate the obtained differences more explicitly, and explore some of the causative factors.

Author's Note

Many individuals made this project possible. In particular, we wish to thank C. Chao, S. Chang, H. Hao-ming, R. Tang, C. Hsiao and the staff of IRAD.

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Table 1

Representative thematic differences between Chinese and American stories

Theme and elements	% frequency in stories: Chinese	American	χ^2	p
A. Greater social orientation				
Adults are helpful (story 1)	23	8	5.42	.05
Other children introduced (1)	25	7	7.81	.01
Teamwork is expressed (1)	26	10	5.93	.01
Punishment is public shame (3)	21	0	11.29	.01
Storekeeper explicitly mentioned (2)	21	0	15.72	.01
B. Concern with authority				
More adults introduced (2)	42	17	11.40	.01
More adults introduced (3)	43	18	8.28	.01
Mention of parents (3)	20	5	4.00	.05
Teacher is omniscient (3)	21	1	8.70	.01
Teacher is bumbling (3)	4	18	4.57	.05
C. Moral-ethical rectitude				
Moral explictly stated (1)	24	1	13.18	.01
Child rewarded for truth (2)	21	6	5.52	.05

Promise of correct future behavior (2)	22	5	7.96	.01
Boys not caught (5)	3	29	13.41	.01
Mother gives "sermon" (4)	20	5	4.02	.05
D. Natural forces and chance				
Positive natural forces (1)	26	4	11.04	.01
Miscreant suffers from "chance" punishment (1)	13	1	5.29	.05
Mention made of luck (all stories)	27	2	74.75	.01
Denial that action was intentional (2)	26	12	5.16	.05
E. Affective elements				
Protagonist shows fear (2)	18	3	8.45	.01
Thief is fearful (3)	20	0	10.08	.01
Teacher is angry (3)	25	5	6.93	.01
Jealousy expressed (1)	18	4	4.80	.05
F. Physical aggressiveness				
Peter physically attacks Frank (1)	3	21	8.57	.01
Instances of physical aggressiveness (all stories)	5	36	93.01	.01

G. Economic Orientation				
Michael pays for lost meat (2)	2	13	4.43	.05
Family is poor (3)	5	21	4.93	.05
Coat's value explicitly mentioned (4)	0	17	7.76	.01
Boys pay for damage (5)	0	27	17.45	.01